Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food

Farm & Food Report

Communications Branch, Walter Scott Building
3085 Albert Street, Regina, Canada, S4S 0B1

Saskatchewan

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Week of January 1, 2007

TURKEY MARKET GROWING THROUGH VALUE-ADDED PROCESSING

Many of us will have recently savoured the juicy taste of a good, old-fashioned roast turkey over the Christmas season. The turkey market is enjoying a bit of growth these days, mainly because of value-added processing that's taking it beyond its traditional status as a holiday feast.

"We're seeing an overall increase across Canada in the consumption of further processed products," said Rose Olsen, General Manager of the Saskatchewan Turkey Producers Marketing Board.

"There was a time not too long ago when you could only find whole turkey in a grocery store," she noted. "Now, moving forward, you've got everything from deli meats to turkey bacon to fresh ground turkey – even being able to buy just a turkey breast or thigh so you can go home and cook a meal more suited to a small family. We're finding the customers appreciative of that, especially as the population ages."

Olsen suspects the growing emphasis on healthy eating is the real driving force behind turkey's increasing popularity. "Turkey is just a very, very lean product. It's very low in fat, that's the number one reason. You can roast a boneless, skinless turkey breast, and it will have less than one gram of fat per 100 gram serving," she stated.

"We're finding that, as the baby boomers grow older, they tend to eat healthier. So, with eating healthier, they're eating more turkey. As a result, we're seeing a little bit of an increase in consumption."

Olsen says the change in eating habits is even being reflected in fast food chains like McDonald's, which are now carrying turkey subs to meet consumer demand. But she also noted that the turkey industry is doing a lot to help its own cause, including developing new recipes for people to try at home, as well as making cooking information available to help consumers who aren't as familiar with the bird.

Here in Saskatchewan, there's also a lot going on within the turkey industry. There are 15 licensed producers in the province, operating under supply management to ensure they get a fair return on their product, according to Olsen.

Olsen says one of the things Saskatchewan producers are focusing on is serving and supplying the local market better. She says that most domestic production seems to be geared towards sales outside the province, even though more could probably remain here and be sold in Saskatchewan stores.

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Part of the reason is that there has been virtually no turkey processing capacity in the province for the past five years. A small, provincially inspected kill plant at Pine View Farms in Osler does a minimal amount of production for its customers. Other than that, almost all of the birds get sent elsewhere for processing, with roughly two-thirds heading to Alberta and one-third to Manitoba.

Olsen says that may be about to change, thanks to the Prairie Pride poultry processing plant that began operating in Saskatoon in early 2006. While the plant has so far mainly focused on processing chickens, it is expected to broaden its operations to include turkeys in the near future.

Olsen says Saskatchewan turkey producers take food safety very seriously. In fact, she pointed out that the industry in this province has been working towards an on-farm food safety program that all producers will be incorporating, starting in January 2007.

"The intent of the training is just to tighten up a few things around the farm," she stated. "Our producers are already doing a pretty good job, since they have to meet certain standards to ship to processing plants. But this will ensure that our consumers are getting the very safest of products, and that the birds are raised in a healthy, safe and humane environment. So we're pretty proud that our growers are all going to be approved."

Anyone looking for unique and tasty turkey recipes is encouraged to visit the Canadian Turkey Marketing Agency website at www.turkeyfordinner.ca. Among the more than 100 mouth-watering ideas you will find there are Grilled Citrus Turkey Steaks, Basil-Walnut Turkey Breast Slices, Best-Ever Turkey Chili and Turkey Chowder. Bon appetit!

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INNOVATOR'S VISION COULD TAKE SASKATOONS TO THE NEXT LEVEL

A Saskatchewan innovator in the saskatoon sector has come up with another bright idea that could take her industry to the next level.

Sandy Purdy, founder of Prairie Berries Inc. near Keeler, developed the concept of dry-packaging saskatoons by borrowing from the successes other berry markets have enjoyed by making their product available in a dry goods format.

"In gauging the potential that I see for our dried saskatoons, I only have to draw parallels to other fruits in the industry, such as dried cranberries or dried blueberries," Purdy said.

"Look at the phenomenal growth of cranberries over a five-year period. Outside of being in a bag or can at Thanksgiving time, you never saw them in any other form. Now you see them in muffins and bagels and granola bars, or dried so that consumers can eat them as a snack food," she added.

"So you look at that kind of growth, and it's not that we're inventing anything new. We're probably just following the pack, just trying to find alternative uses for our saskatoons."

Purdy received funding from the Advancing Canadian Agriculture and Agri-Food Saskatchewan (ACAAFS) program to cover 50 per cent of the cost in developing her concept into a project for experimentation. Without this kind of assistance from ACAAFS, she says that small businesses like hers probably wouldn't be able to bring their ideas for innovative food products into reality.

Since receiving the funding, Purdy has been working with the Saskatchewan Food Industry Development Centre in Saskatoon to perfect a drying process for saskatoons first of all, then to test things like shelf life, packaging options, consumer feedback and marketplace stability.

Weight and shelf life are the two main benefits of a dried food product, which should be able to store without any degradation in quality for at least 12 months. Since Purdy's project began in June 2006, the results of its shelf life tests won't be known until mid-2007.

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If the product development processes and marketability trials are successful, Purdy sees incredible potential for expansion in the province's saskatoon industry. Should the product take off in the same way as other dried berries, not only would increased demand improve returns on the existing berry supply, but it would also require more saskatoons to be grown overall. At the same time, commercial production facilities would likely be required, delivering a boost to value-added processing in the province.

Working on a dried saskatoon product is just the latest innovation from Purdy. Over the past year, she also began packaging and shipping saskatoons to Germany as a means of testing prospective new European markets. The endeavour proved to be successful. Her German broker has indicated he wants to import the berries again next season.

Purdy says her continual efforts to develop new saskatoon markets are a labour of love. "I have a passion for agriculture and I have a passion for saskatoons, so I see my role as continuing to push the envelope and see what else we can do with these products."

Ever the visionary, Purdy sees the potential for the berries to play a much greater role in the province's agricultural sector. "Is it perhaps an alternative crop for Saskatchewan? I think that's a question we should really think about. If we're not getting the prices we'd like on wheat, can we make it work with saskatoons?" she asked.

"It's a native fruit to the province. My goodness, we should be able to do something with it!"

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HIGHLIGHTS OF CROP PRODUCTION WEEK 2007 IN SASKATOON

Producers, suppliers, researchers and government leaders will once again assemble to assess the state of the grain industry during Crop Production Week, January 8 to 13 in Saskatoon.

The annual tradition of producers sharing knowledge and suppliers showing their wares continues as the Western Canadian Crop Production Show runs in tandem with Crop Production Week activities.

Crop Production Week activities are centred at the Saskatoon Inn and the Heritage Inn across the street. The week includes meetings organized by many crop producer groups, including pulse, canola, flax, mustard, herb and spice, canaryseed, fruit and oat producers. The Canadian Wheat Board also hosts a meeting. The meetings will feature a lengthy list of presentations on topics ranging from production issues to market projections.

Crop Production Week Communications Manager Kevin Hursh notes that this is the first year that oat producers will be represented in a special session, adding, "We're glad to have them." Hursh forecasts that the special session planned for Wednesday evening, entitled *Producer Investment in Biofuel Production*, will be a major draw this year.

"By then, we should know what the federal government's producer ownership incentive will look like, and that will be a big topic of discussion," said Hursh. "It is a dramatically different marketplace this year with the demand for biofuels."

Down the road at the Western Canadian Crop Production Show, exhibitor space has once again sold out, according to Lori Cates of Prairieland Park, which hosts the show.

"We expanded the criteria this year to include forage cutting and baling equipment, and four-wheel-drive tractors," said Cates. To accommodate demand for displays, Prairieland is expanding the show into its newest building, which will bring trade fair space up to over 240,000 square feet. However, Cates says the show maintains a very focused approach, zeroing in on the needs of grain producers.

The Western Canadian Crop Production Show includes displays and information sessions on crop production practices and products, equipment, commodity marketing, soil and seed technology, and grain handling, among other topics. Cates says the popular Seager Wheeler Pedigreed Seed Show will be the largest ever, and predicts that the Bayer Crop Science Information Theatre will be a highlight for show guests.

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Detailed information on the agenda and registration for Crop Production Week is available at www.cropweek.com. A full listing of show times and exhibitors for the Western Canadian Crop Production Show can be found at www.cropproductiononline.com.

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WESTERN GRAIN RESEARCH FOUNDATION LOOKING TO WIDEN SCOPE

The Saskatoon-based Western Grain Research Foundation (WGRF) is exploring options to broaden its research check-off on wheat and barley to serve producers in the non-food grain market.

The foundation is a farmer-funded and -directed organization that was established in 1981 to support research on new wheat and barley varieties, and to develop new technology that will improve production to enhance the competitiveness of Canadian grain in the international market.

WGRF Executive Director Lanette Kuchenski explains that their check-off is currently limited to Canadian Wheat Board sales, which are exclusively aimed at the food market.

"We are stretching the check-off dollars collected on export grains to fund research for domestic industrial uses such as ethanol, as well as for our livestock industries," said Kuchenski.

The foundation is now developing plans to expand the check-off to wheat and barley sales outside the CWB system. Kuchenski says that may include looking at provincial and/or federal legislation, but stresses that the plan will be the subject of a great deal of producer consultation.

"We have always relied on producer input through our board, and we will be scheduling meetings with producer and industry groups to hear their input," Kuchenski noted.

The WGRF is currently collecting 30 cents per tonne on wheat and 50 cents per tonne on barley on CWB sales. The money is allocated to research projects to improve grain breeding, with the objectives of higher yields, better quality, stronger disease and pest resistance, and improved agronomic traits and characteristics for new market opportunities.

In 2007, the foundation expects to collect about $5.1 million to apply to new projects. If non-CWB sales were included, approximately $3.1 million more would become available.

Kuchenski says new funds would be directed toward specific research that enhances production for the growing ethanol and livestock feed markets.

"The ethanol system also involves new by-products, and we have to look at the breeding mechanisms that will contribute to improving those," she said.

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According to a Return on Investment study conducted for the WGRF, every dollar in wheat development is returning four dollars to farmers, while a dollar in barley research returns 12 dollars to the producer. The producers' contributions are also a catalyst to leverage additional federal and provincial government research funding.

The foundation will engage in a consultative process with producer organizations in 2007 as the next step in developing the strategy to expand the check-off. Producers can learn more on the Western Grain Research Foundation website at www.westerngrains.com, or by calling the foundation at (306) 975-0060.

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ALFALFA SEED PRODUCERS TO MEET IN SASKATOON

The Saskatchewan Alfalfa Seed Producers Association (SASPA) will be celebrating a milestone when it meets for its 2007 annual conference January 11 and 12 in Saskatoon.

"It's the SASPA 35th annual business meeting," explained Wayne Goerzen, SASPA Executive Director. "It's also the 10th annual business meeting of the Saskatchewan Alfalfa Seed Producers Development Commission (SASPDC), funded through a check-off on Saskatchewan alfalfa seed in order to advance research and development initiatives."

Goerzen said Saskatchewan is a leader when it comes to alfalfa seed production, which always makes for an interesting and educational conference. "It's a Western Canadian industry, and the largest segment of it is right here in Saskatchewan," he stated. "We have the largest alfalfa seed production area in the world, probably over 100,000 acres. There are anywhere from 200 to 250 producers in the industry at present, spread all over the province, but mostly concentrated in the northeast."

As a niche industry and a diversified area within agriculture, Goerzen noted that alfalfa seed production has a few characteristics that distinguish it from conventional farming. Most notably, it requires a friendly relationship with an insect – the alfalfa leafcutting bee – which producers count on to pollinate their crops.

"We have to manage not only the crop, but the bee that pollinates it, so there is an extra level of management, which is very important to producers," he explained.

Goerzen said this year's conference will focus on various aspects of the alfalfa seed industry, both market-related and production-related. "We'll spend some time discussing the current status of alfalfa seed markets, and we'll have research people talking about things of interest on the management side of seed production, such as insect, disease and weed control. As always, we will also focus attention on alfalfa leafcutting bee management."

He added that SASPA doesn't have to go very far to find experts in areas that are important to alfalfa seed producers. "We have excellent research people at the University of Saskatchewan and Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, and we also bring people in from Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food."

(more)

Goerzen said the conference has earned a reputation over the years as a good place for producers to come to find out what's going on in the industry. In addition to the scientific and technical sessions, producers are also able to network with one another and speak individually with the experts and presenters in attendance.

Another attraction for producers is the conference's tradeshow, Goerzen added, "which is unique in that it highlights alfalfa leafcutting bee equipment-related companies. It's specialized equipment, so you don't often have a tradeshow where this type of equipment is on display."

While the majority of the 100 to 150 people who generally attend the conference each year are alfalfa seed producers, individuals from the seed trade and those involved in research and extension at the provincial or federal government levels also readily participate.

Individuals interested in attending the SASPA conference can register at the door for a fee of $100 for the two-day meeting. More information can be obtained from the SASPA website at www.saspa.com, or by calling Wayne Goerzen at (306) 651-7275.

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